

'Humsheera', 'Humsaya': Sisters, Neighbours

Women's Testimonies from Kashmir

Ritu Dewan

In the clamour of reports about the increasing violence in Kashmir, people outside the state have lost sight of what is happening to ordinary people of the Valley, especially the women.

THE people of Kashmir have faced the terror of security forces and lived with violence since their movement for 'azaadi' took to armed struggle in 1989. National media coverage has largely been restricted to the 'law and order' situation. In the clamour of reports of increasing violence, allegations and counter-allegations, people who live outside Kashmir seem to have lost sight of what is actually happening to the ordinary people of Kashmir, especially to women.

We, the Women's Initiative, set out to record the testimonies of ordinary people, particularly women about their experiences. We hoped to build bridges with our Kashmiri sisters, expressing our solidarity with them in their suffering. We have tried to present the voices of the people we met as faithfully as possible. Kashmiris are, in the main, supportive of the azaadi movement but were not openly critical of militants, may be because they feared reprisal by certain groups.

Violence has completely destroyed the day-to-day life of the Kashmiri people. Fear of the security forces seems to be overriding as it is they who target the ordinary people. Bunkers proliferate in every area. Guns protrude from the windows, pointing directly at the street and passers-by, always ready to fire. The BSF, brought in ostensibly to ensure the security of the populace, actually generates a terrible, constant insecurity. Life itself is not secure. Farewell greetings have changed from 'Khuda Hafis' (God be with you) to 'Sahi Salamat Laut Ana' (come back safe).

Frequent curfews, combined with the fact that the armed forces rule the nights in the Valley, means that all have to return home before sun set. Shops, hotels, restaurants, hawkers are open only during the day, resulting in a drastic decline in income. Frequent hartals too lead to closure of economic enterprises for the entire day. Decline in tourism has severely affected the handicraft industry, small artisans, taxi-drivers, guides, flower-sellers, boat-owners, etc. The government has shut down or shifted most of its offices from the Valley. The few industries and factories that existed have also folded up. Banks barely function.

Poverty is increasing, families are surviving on highly reduced incomes. Girls cannot go into the forest to collect firewood anymore for fear of drunken BSF men. Due

to the prices having shot up and everyday items being unavailable, at least nine families we met are now forced to cook food only once a day, leading to undernourishment and malnutrition. Informal communication networks function efficiently. Reports of incidents, stories, songs and slogans travel rapidly through the Valley. Newspapers are avidly read and discussed and the general public is well informed on the most recent events to do with Kashmir. The formal communications network however seems to be less efficient and is often not trusted. The government banned the distribution of newspapers in the Valley till about a year-and-a-half ago. People still depend for most of their news on the BBC. Two private radio networks were started but ran only for a short time. The militants seem to be the most organised disseminators of information. Often villagers knew at least 15 to 30 minutes in advance that we were arriving, even though we had no contacts in most villages and were travelling in a random manner.

BAZAAR OF WOUNDS

We visited four districts in the Valley and also the migrant camps in Jammu. In every village and town the anger of the people is directed towards the paramilitary forces, BSF and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Kashmiris view the Indian Army, stationed in Kashmir since 1947, as "relatively disciplined and worthy of respect". The BSF and CRPF in every area we visited have unleashed violence. Men are tortured, sodomised, killed; women sexually harassed, molested, raped; homes looted and burned.

In Bandipora town, tehsil and district Baramulla, we visited, among many others, the family of Aiyaz Ahmed Mir Shahri, killed in custody on November 8, 1991. He was severely tortured, as was evident in the photographs of his body - wounds, cuts, holes, electric shocks on his eyes, head, throat, tongue, chest, arms, abdomen, private parts, legs. His body was thrown into a ditch from where it was picked up by villagers. His family has been continuously harassed even after his murder, his house raided innumerable times, his father taken for interrogation and tortured 18 times.

In Malangam village, tehsil Bandipora, district Baramulla, we met Ghulam Mohd

Lone, father of 15-year-old Chopan, a somewhat retarded shepherd boy. Chopan was picked up by security forces while playing with his friends who were all grazing sheep. His friends teasingly called him 'area commander', hearing which soldiers of the CRPF 50th Battalion picked him up as a militant. In spite of writ petitions filed and orders received from the high court, dated April 3, 1991, Chopan has still not been produced. Mariam's husband was publicly stripped and his stomach slit open by the BSF in early 1993. She was publicly raped. Today she has a four-month-old child conceived during the rape. She receives absolutely no support from anyone in the village, is extremely poor and survives by doing field labour when and if anyone employs her.

At Ajar village, tehsil Bandipora, district Baramulla, we met some of the seven Kashmiri pandit families who have stayed behind, the other eight having migrated in July 1990. Most of them are landowners and those still there are looking after the land of those who have migrated. These families have chosen to remain because of their strong cultural roots. They do not fear their Muslim neighbours. They told us that they meet each other regularly and as the Hindu population has decreased, it is the Muslims who help them with their religious functions, especially funerals - 'kandha lagana'. Kashmiri pandit houses are also subject to raids and searches and these women too face harassment from the jawans. In fact, Suman had to leave her teaching job in a school 12 km away because of this fear. Two special problems are those of loneliness arising out of friends leaving, and marriage - there are few pandit boys left in the Valley and also few girls are willing to be married into families residing in the Valley.

Tregam, in Kupwara, is the village of Maqbool Butt who was hanged in 1984. Here, because of its proximity to the border crack-downs and searches take place regularly, more than 60 since 1990. In the crack-down on April 25, 1994, over 70 men and women, old and young, were tortured and molested; 34 of the boys and 13 of the girls injured in the crack-down were proceeding to Srinagar for medical treatment on April 27 when they were stopped by the BSF at Drugmulla, slapped, beaten on fresh wounds, their clothes, dupattas and burqas were torn, and they were kept till after dark without any food or water. Demonstrations against atrocities, looting and taking away of innocents are attacked and demonstrators beaten up and molested.

In Poshpora village, tehsil and district Kupwara, we met Bastar Ahmad Bhat, son of Lakshi Bhat who was barely 14 years old when he was picked up in 1989. For over a year, he was badly tortured, and given high voltage electric shocks on his head. As a result, he has become totally insane and violent to the extent that his sisters had

to be sent away because he began beating them.

Kunan Poshpora in Kupwara is the most 'famous' village in the Valley, where over 30 women and children were raped by the 5th Rajputana Rifles on February 21, 1991; the village and the women on whom video films have been made, where numerous national and international teams have gone, where George Verghese conducted an investigation for the Press Council of India, spent 15 minutes, and concluded that no rape had taken place because the raped girls had been laughing. No marriage has taken place in the village in the last three years. All girls, raped and not raped, are single. All the married raped women have been deserted. After intervention by militants and elders, two husbands did take their wives back, one on the condition that there be no conjugal relations, the other that he live in the city away from his wife.

Sharifa, mother of six children, committed suicide, along with another raped woman. Seven sisters who were gang raped have been left to fend for themselves. A nine-month-old pregnant woman delivered a child three days after she was gang raped by eight jawans; the child had both arms fractured. Bano delivered a five and a half month old foetus two weeks after she was raped; luckily for her, the dismembered child was dead.

A Jammu and Kashmir Armed Police jawan was tied to a post and forced to watch the gang rape of his 70-year-old grandmother, 45-year-old mother and 18-year-old sister. Uteri swollen and hanging, spines distorted, arms broken... medical treatment has to continue even after three years. There is no compensation, no support. The case is still pending in the Srinagar High Court. The girls are teased and taunted, even by the village men; "did you enjoy it? Want some more?" None of the girls go outside the village. Boys who go to school and college are teased by their fellow students: "You are from that raped village? Do you have fun with them now?"

Bijbehara in Anantnag is the scene of one of the most heinous massacres. On October 22, 1993 a peaceful demonstration against the Hazarathal siege was fired upon here and over 60 people were killed. A large number of women were raped during search operations carried out on the same day. We met Gauhar Umeed Baid, aged 24, who has been in jail almost continuously since 1986. He was first arrested when, as a young boy of 16; he attended out of curiosity, a peaceful public meeting addressed by Shabir Shah. The right side of his face is totally disfigured due to torture. Dwarkanath Kaul's younger son, 15-year-old Kamal, an 8th standard student was killed in the October 22 massacre. His mother wept and told us how Muslim boys had carried his body home, stayed all night with her, raised money for his last rites.

A marble memorial was built for the 'shaheed' Kamal. Even now the Muslim boys come every week and give money, rice, wheat and milk. The mother's words were "today's rulers look after us".

We met the mothers of six girls who had been gang raped on October 22, 1993. Three of them were 'accepted' by their husbands only after JKLF militants intervened, but this is obviously no solution as the girls are beaten by their in-laws on the slightest pretext. Two other 17-year-old unmarried girls who were raped ran away along with their families four days after the rape. There is no news of them since then. Eighteen-year-old Manzoor Ahmad Dar, son of Suna Wala Dar, was shot clear through the head while he was fishing in the nearby stream, under the suspicion that he might have been able to identify the rapists.

Misriwala Migrant Camp lies about 20 kms from Jammu city. It houses about 200 families in pucca structures and another 250 in tents. Each house is about 12' x 11', with a little patch of garden in the front. The water and toilet facilities are common to all the tenements. Electricity and water are free. Each family is given Rs 1,500 per month and each member gets free rations every month - 9 kg rice, 2 kg of wheat flour and 1 kg sugar. Cooking is generally done in the room, although quite a few families use the tents as kitchens.

The over-crowded camp does not allow any privacy. The Kashmiri pandits are angry about the government dole of Rs 1,500. "They should give us jobs instead. At least we will retain our self-respect then." They call themselves refugees, not migrants. Some left their homes in the Valley because of fear of Islamisation, some because the pro-Pakistan group Hizbul Mujahidin put up stickers on doors warning them to leave or be killed.

Kashmiri pandit women in Jammu now face a new problem - that of wife-battering. In fact, a women's organisation, Mahila Mandal, has been recently set up to deal with this issue. We were surprised to learn of a tradition - that of Kashmiri pandit women having Kashmiri Muslim rakhi brothers. Some of these rakhi brothers stay with their sisters in the camp for two-three weeks every year.

When asked whether they would return to the Valley, the men in the camps replied "only when the tri-colour is hoisted in Kashmir". But some of the women stated categorically that they would return even if Kashmir became independent. "We have visited many places in India, but the respect we have received from Kashmiri people, especially the men, remains unsurpassed".

UNSAFE HOSPITALS

We visited three major hospitals in Srinagar - Lal Ded Maternity Hospital, Bone and Joint Hospital and Government

Psychiatric Hospital. All hospitals are regularly raided and searched by the forces. In Lal Ded the forces have entered labour rooms when deliveries are actually taking place and even marched into operation theatres while surgery is underway. They have shot open doors, broken into doctors' rooms, made even seriously ill patients get up in order to search beds.

In the maternity sections spontaneous abortions due to stress have doubled. Maternal and infant mortality rates have increased due to decline in access to medical facilities, partly because of curfew and partly because of shortage of doctors caused by the migration of Kashmiri pandit doctors. In October 1989, the Hizbul opposed sterilisations and abortions as being anti-Islamic. Banners and leaflets were pasted all over. Since then no hospital can perform abortion or sterilisations.

Over 50 amputations were carried out in the Bone and Joint Hospital between 1989 and 1993. Additionally, 1,500 major surgeries have been performed on bullet cases some of which have led to amputation. The number of indoor admissions averages around 12,000 per year in the last four years, and OPD patients are about 90,000 per year. The largest number of cases reported was in 1990, mainly during Jagmohan's governorship - over 2,55,000. Also, the number of bullet, blast and firearm injuries has been increasing over the years from 36 in 1989 to 414 in 1993, as has the number of disabilities due to the above - from 25 in 1989 to 311 in 1993.

The staff of the Government Psychiatric Hospital informed us that the number of OPD cases had gone up from 20 to 125 per day since 1989. Most patients are boys and young men suffering from depression, insomnia and psychological stress. "Many women too suffer from stress but few are brought to hospital because of social stigma". In the hospitals, women and village people complained of what they called a 'heart problem', their way of describing the physiological trauma, stress and fear that has sunk into the hearts and minds of a population living with terror.

FROM BOOKS TO BOOTS

Teachers, students, parents - all complained that education has been in total disarray for the last five years. In many areas during 1990-91, schools and colleges were closed for the major part of the year due to the imposition of curfew. A large number of school buildings were requisitioned by the military and paramilitary forces. Many have been burnt. In Sopore, we were told that it was the militants who burnt down buildings used by the security forces. Rebuilding has started only this year. Educational institutions, including the University of Kashmir, are regularly raided: teachers, students and employees

have been paraded before 'informers', beaten up, tortured, interrogated and arrested. Hostels are considered 'hot-beds' of militants and residents regularly questioned and picked up.

The syllabus is never completed, on an average only one-third of the required portion is taught. Regular postponement of Bachelor's Degree exams leads to delayed results and hence missing admission deadlines for universities outside J and K. Heads of various departments in Srinagar informed us that the 1991 MBBS exams were to be held in May 1994. They also pointed out that over a period of time the number of doctors would decline because the still-existing 20 per cent reservation for Kashmiri pandits was being kept vacant as migrants are now accommodated elsewhere. Also, no examiners were willing to come from outside the Valley. Vacant posts often cannot be filled as migrant Kashmiri pandits are still drawing salaries against them. Some posts are filled by either non-qualified or 'second-rate' teachers. Some teachers have also taken advantage of the breakdown in the educational system and begun taking private tuitions, often charging exorbitant fees. The 'tuition culture' is pervasive, particularly in Srinagar for the 10th and 12th and for graduation. In rural areas education is being increasingly conducted by private institutions which include 'madarsas' (religious schools), rather than in government institutions. We were struck by the fact that Kashmiri was not taught, and was not the medium of instruction anywhere.

In every area we visited girls complained that they are being compelled to give up education. The most important reason is the widespread sexual harassment by the forces. While many have given up going to school especially if the school is located at a distance, others do not dare inform their families because "if we tell them at home how the forces lift our burqas and pull our dupattas, our parents will stop us going to school". Some girl students also had to contend with restrictions sought to be imposed by some militants. Shabnam told us, "one day three militants entered our class and insisted that all the girls wear burqas. When our teacher told them to leave, they mishandled him."

In what is now termed as "an over-reaction to felt cultural imperialism", some militants imposed restrictions on girls wearing skirts and jeans. A missionary school withstood the pressure for some time, but finally gave in and changed the uniform from skirts to 'salvar kameez'. Thousands of students have participated in numerous demonstrations, strikes, processions. Students, teachers and employees have often jointly protested against state terrorism, human rights violations, custodial deaths, arrests of innocents, arson, looting, bunkers located in university premises, the Hazratbal siege, molestation and rape.

J and K Students' Organisation, J and K Students' Association and Kashmir University Teachers' Association are probably among the few organisations that are today struggling for sectional demands such as improvement in hostel facilities, against delayed results, for shifting of exam centres to district police lines to avoid killing by security forces, corruption, appointment of sycophants, etc. The Kashmir 'problem' is viewed by university teachers and students as one of "colonial India occupying the nation of Kashmir".

The Kashmiri youth have a lot to be discontented with. Unemployment levels are very high. The Kashmiri student faces various kinds of discrimination: "Why are we asked for identity cards when we go to any place in India?" "Kashmiri students in Aligarh, Bombay, Delhi, Bangalore are always harassed by the police." Recently 300 Kashmiri students in Bangalore held a demonstration protesting against police harassment. Rightly or wrongly, the Kashmiri suffers a feeling of neglect, a severe sense of discrimination because he/she is Kashmiri and Muslim. Historically, Kashmiri pandits have held a dominant position in Kashmir in government services, educational institutions, hospitals and business. The most obnoxious form of institutionalised

discrimination is the 'militant victim quota' introduced in J and K for reservation in educational institutions and allotment of accommodation, etc. Exaggerated and baseless claims are often made in order to avail of the quota.

Anger, courage, fearlessness, frustration, coupled with their firm belief in Azadi, have forced many students to question the importance of education in their lives as they are being compelled to live it today. A young 16-year old boy, furious that his sister had been molested, cried, "I wanted more than anything else in this world to study, to learn, to teach. I was even selected for Navodaya schools in Chandigarh and Delhi and Rajasthan. I always felt I was the only Indian in Kashmir. But now that last Indian is no more. I will give up my studies and pick up the gun instead. Then I will also teach my sisters to use the gun." The 55-year-old principal of a secondary school said, "I was so proud that there was no militant either in my school or my village. But now I believe that my greatest mistake in life has been to tie the feet of my boys with the chains of education. I will now free their feet and give each boy a pair of military boots to march out of the village and join the movement."

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Since 1989 women have come out on the streets *en masse*. The Kashmiri liberation movement would not have withstood the onslaught of state repression without the support and participation of women. In our eyes every Kashmiri woman is a true 'mujahid', a fighter for justice. They provide a non-violent resistance that has sustained domestic life with courage, honour and active support to the dream of independent Kashmir. Although it is the Kashmiri youth, young boys who have been the main targets of the state's anti-military offensive, women have not been spared. Not forgetting those who have fallen to the bullets fired at civilians during peaceful demonstrations or those who died or were injured in crossfire, Kashmiri women have been the targets of brutality on the part of the Indian security forces, both as punishment for their support of the struggle, implicit or explicit, as well as a means of breaking the movement itself.

Kashmiri society has been known for the relative freedom of women. Talaq has never been an issue for women; in fact it is looked down upon. The recent legal controversy over the validity of triple talaq warranted only a small report in the inside pages of newspapers. Similarly the practice of four wives does not exist in Kashmir. Rape is new to Kashmiri women as in many mountain regions. Certain human rights organisations stated that no one had heard of rape in Kashmir, not even by the Indian army stationed to safeguard the borders since 1947. Actual incidents of rape are higher than those revealed because of the associated stigma. The report of the Press Council in 1991 which stated that these were fabricated to disgrace the army seems doubly ironical. The question of the future of raped women, widows and half-widows present a challenge to the azaadi movement. These issues have not gained the attention of the leaders. There is no lack of sympathy, but building a local support structure requires organised effort. The leadership seems to feel that once azaadi came these problems would be solved automatically.

With 30,000 men killed and an estimated 11,000 widows, another major issue facing Kashmiri society today is the economic survival of widows and the care of fatherless children left with aging grandparents. There are no other sources of support. Women who have some land face fewer problems but most eke out a living doing piece-rate work such as making caps or by selling their labour. Feeding and rearing children is almost impossible. Some said people contribute towards the support of widows. However with the present economic depression they are able to give very little.

Although there is no social stigma attached to remarriage, many women have chosen

not to remarry because they knew that their children will not be accepted by another man. An additional problem has arisen with the increase in the number of women whose husbands are missing – taken for interrogation and not returned – 'half-widows'. The forces claim that they have no information even though they had been arrested.

Women are generally not independently organised, or even included in existing political organisations as such. The Dukhtarani Milat and the Khawateen Markaaz are Srinagar-based organisations which had taken up 'mazabi taleem', Arabic studies of the Quran to impart what they considered correct interpretations of the role of women in Islam. Both organisations were among the first to reach Kunan Poshpora after the mass rapes. Khawateen Markaaz started as social workers in 1986. In 1990 after the Gaunkadal massacre when security forces killed 60 people in a peaceful demonstration they joined the azaadi movement. On principle none of the activists work in government of India offices although members do. There are

about 3,000 members spread over most districts. Each district is divided into zones and sub-zones for organisational purposes. Khawateen Markaaz is the only women's organisation represented in the Hurriyat Committee.

The Dukhtarani Milat began in 1986 in protest against Kashmiri girls being selected to act as hostesses for a foreign cultural group. They also campaigned on issues of obscenity and sexual exploitation of women and demanded reservation of seats in buses, etc. The organisation had started a movement against dowry, actively raiding and seizing goods which they then gave to poor women for their marriages. They had their own action squads known as the 'chapamaar' teams and did not seek support from men. The Dukhtarani Milat has lost ground today mainly because it attempted to impose 'burqa' on Kashmiri women. Their aggressive campaign to put college girls in burqa completely covering the body and face went to the extent of throwing coloured powder on girls who refused.

The people of Kashmir are caught between state terrorism and the militants. The women

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say, "The security forces kill, rape, burn and loot our homes under cover of search operations." The militants target the security forces, blowing up bunkers, mining convoys, setting ablaze school buildings which the security forces occupy. In the cross fire, ordinary people die. The militant's gun is seen as a protection against army brutalities. There is both fear of and admiration for the militant, fear about speaking against their extortion of money, demand for food and the fact that they carry guns. Admiration because the militant is ready to die for their cause. He carries a gun, the symbol of power and of death. Many people accepted the loss of these young men saying that, "If a militant dies, it is a natural outcome of the choice he has made". Many militants are peasants who have joined or been recruited into the struggle and received training in arms. Often they are motivated by direct experiences of torture, interrogation and humiliation at the hands of the forces. While the majority are not educated, there are a number of instances of educated youth taking to the gun in frustration against discrimination and unemployment. As some Kashmiris say, "If the government of India used the one crore rupees a day it spends on maintaining its military operations in Kashmir on developing industries and providing jobs, we would not have militancy."

An overwhelming factor in the creation of militants is that any young man between 15 and 25 years of age is treated as a militant by the forces, whether he is one or not. Coupled with no employment, a crippled artisan and peasant economy, daily violence and an increasing sense of outrage and humiliation, young men begin to feel the gun is the only solution. "All Kashmiri youth look like militants to our faujibhais" said Ameena, a secondary school teacher. "In Bandipore they caught the whole class and took them away two days before their exams. When they were released one month later, they became militants." Many people reported the recruitment of thousands of Kashmiri youth from poor families. They were taken across the border for training, some say to Pakistan, others to Afghanistan. Someone remarked, "The sons of the rich in India and Pakistan go to America to study, for better opportunities. Our boys go out to learn how to use the gun. The power brokers are not interested in stopping the war, their children are not sacrificing their lives."

Militants are not a homogeneous category. There are 'fake' militants; lumpen and anti-social elements who use the movement as a cover for their activities. There are government-sponsored militants, counter-insurgency measures to infiltrate the movement by recruiting Kashmiri defectors. There are foreigners called 'mehman mujahid' often Afghans who fight in different parts of the world in the name of Islam. There are foreign mercenaries who sell their

skills and war weapons to any cause or intelligence service which sponsors them. There are also those who take up the gun as a solution to personal injustice – whether class based, family feud or land dispute.

Notwithstanding such sections, widespread, almost mass militancy which has taken to arms in its struggle for freedom is a fact. What unites disparate ideologies and programmes as well as the ordinary people is a common enemy – the security forces. In the eyes of the Kashmiri, armed militant or not, the actions of the forces are motivated by their hatred/contempt for them as Kashmiris and Muslims. Thus the struggle for political freedom is communalised and a sense of identity with others of the same community forged. The government of India is named as the most important progenitor of militancy. It is, people say, delivering the Kashmiri people into the hands of foreign agents, pro-Pak militants, Pan Islamic forces and whoever appears to be their saviour at this painful juncture in history.

Witnesses at the bazaar of wounds we found buyers and sellers, but none who offered bandages, salves, or sutures. The testimonies we heard, and which we bring to you, clearly demonstrate that the people of the Valley want freedom – from both India and Pakistan – and they want peace. However, it does not seem to be in the interest of those that hold power to actually find a solution and bring about peace. India

and Pakistan continue their proxy war with Kashmir as a battleground. The inclusion of Kashmiri representatives in talks and negotiations between the two nations remains something to be fought for. Meanwhile like the ordinary men and women of the Valley, we fear the brutalisation of a people who have so far managed to keep humanity alive; we fear for the polarisation of religious identities and increasing communalisation of political issues; we fear for the loss of a rich tradition of syncretic, plural culture of 'Kashmiriyat'; we keep faith with the openness and non-sectarian spirit we met and hope that the Kashmiri pandits return to their homeland; we believe that it is this spirit in ordinary people, both within the Valley and outside, which can help to make Kashmir the 'jannat' it once was. Not the same, but wiser, matured, and strengthened by the long years of suffering and struggle. Personally and collectively, we as a team have drawn both strength and inspiration from the women we met. We thank all those who talked with us, shared their stories, their pain, their dreams, their homes and their food. We return with both our faith in human beings and our critique of state power revalidated.

(Other members of Women's Initiative include Gauri Chaudhury, Manimala and Sheba Chhachhi. The team, which visited the Valley and Jammu in May 1994, was funded by contributions from teachers, artistes, lawyers, friends.)

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